

Council hearing touches on county's bus system, schools' capital budget



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Howard County Council held its quickest public hearing this season on Monday night, as talk shifted away from the adequate public facilities ordinance (APFO) bills and mulching bill.

The two hot-button issues have been tabled while council members continue to gather expert information during their work sessions. Instead, council members focused on other issues that have taken a back seat so far this fall, starting with the county's aging bus fleet.

Office Transportation Administrator testified to encourage the council to approve the purchase of six new transit buses, which would be used by the Regional Transit Authority on routes in Howard County. The RTA also serves Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties, but because those jurisdictions opted not to be a part of the bus purchase, the new buses would only be used on routes in the county, Graham said. The old buses would then be used in Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties, and the added maintenance costs for those buses would be paid proportionally by the other jurisdictions.

This is the second time in recent months that the Office of Transportation has sought to purchase new buses. In February, the council approved the purchase of seven buses, which will be delivered to the county in December. If the latest purchase is approved, they are set to be delivered in October 2018, according to Graham. Each bus costs approximately \$360,000, according to Graham.

Graham noted to the council that “the hole that we’re in is quite deep” in terms of the state of the county’s bus fleet, as approximately 27 of its 49 buses are beyond their useful lives and will ultimately need to be replaced. However, he said the continued purchase of more buses is helping to “turn the corner.”

Council chairman Jon Weinstein said he had additional questions about the county’s agreement with Prince George’s and Anne Arundel counties and how the cost-sharing would work between the three jurisdictions, and wanted to receive more information about that agreement before voting on the purchase.

The council also heard from Director of Recreation and Parks John Byrd about the department’s desire to continue its lease of The Timbers at Troy Golf Course to KemperSports Management.

The county owns the golf course, which opened in 1996 in Elkridge, and its current lease with KemperSports is set to expire in 2018.

The proposed 10-year lease would provide positive cash flow to go towards repaying debt the course owes to the county, according to Byrd.

In the past, Recreation and Parks has borrowed \$700,400 from the county’s general fund and \$422,000 from the county’s recreation program fund to cover costs of the course. In addition, the county has spent \$2.8 million to renovate the course, and is set to spend another \$1.2 million on further maintenance and repairs, all of which needs to be paid back to the county.

Byrd said during the meeting that the department has no current specific plan in place to repay the county, but estimated that it could take 10 to 15 years to do so. Howard County auditor Craig Glendenning, whose office performed an audit of the course last year, said that as of now the chances of the money being fully repaid are “slim to none.”

Under the new lease agreement, KemperSports would retain the operational costs of the 18-hole, 208-acre golf course. The county would be guaranteed

\$300,000 a year in payment from the course, and the private company would be allowed up to \$100,000 a year in income.

Monday's meeting did include talk of one piece of legislation related to the controversial mulching bill. The fire department's Deputy Chief Dan Merson testified in support of a separate bill that would update the county's fire code to create more stringent regulations on mulch piles in the county.

The proposed bill would potentially ease safety concerns raised by some county residents about the fire hazard posed by large piles of mulch on farms in the area. If passed, the legislation would require natural wood waste piles to be turned every 3 months, cap the maximum height of ground piles at 10 feet and require at least 25 feet between piles on a property to allow for a fire lane.

The council will have the chance to vote on Monday's discussed legislation, as well as the APFO and mulching bills, at its Nov. 6 legislative session.